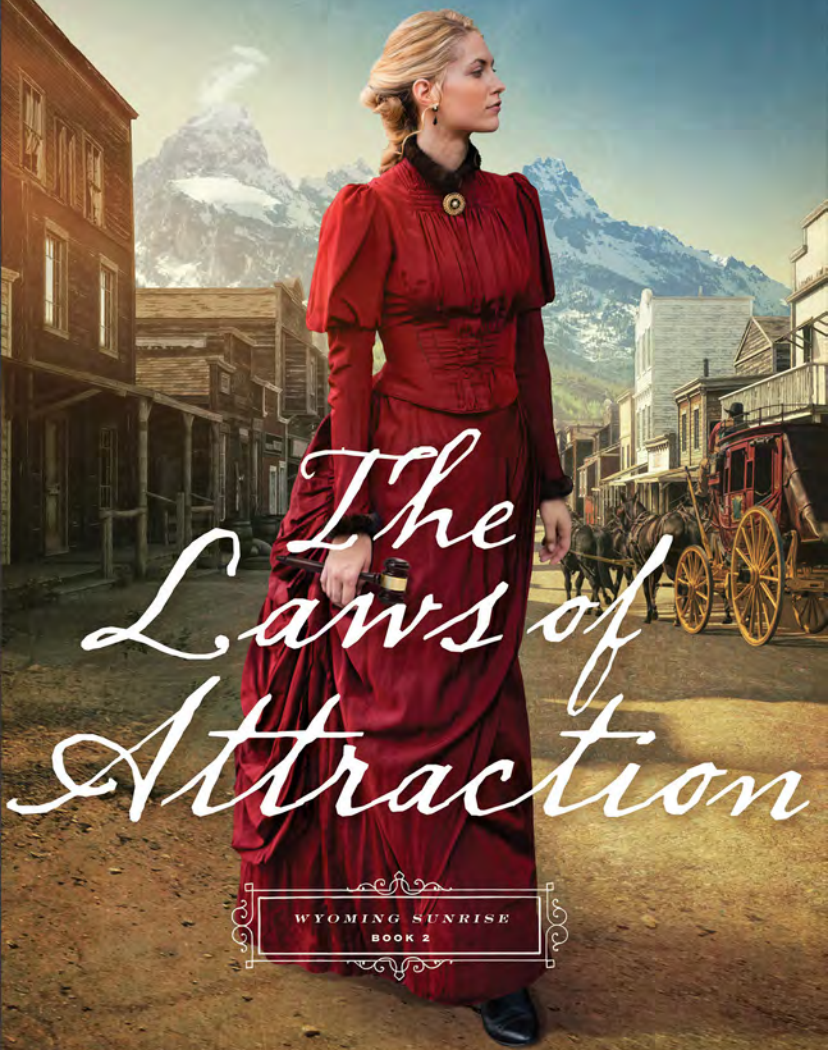


BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MARY CONNEALY



*The
Laws of
Attraction*

WYOMING SUNRISE
BOOK 2

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Her Secret Song



The Laws of Attraction

MARY CONNEALY



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To my mom, Dorothy Moore

This is my first chance to dedicate a book to my mom since she passed away. Mom, the best encourager. The best at making a daughter, trying to write a book, feel like it was possible. A woman of great faith, so I know she's in a better place. But I miss her. I love you, Mom.

1

MAY 1871
PINE VALLEY, WYOMING
NEAR THE WIND RIVER MOUNTAINS

If I have to make one more pair of chaps . . .” Nell Armstrong heard her own voice. Good grief, thinking about chaps had her talking to herself again. She badly wanted to make dresses and bonnets, ribbons and ruffles. “Would it kill someone in this town to want a few yards of lace?”

Irritated, she snapped her teeth together to shut herself up. Then she thought of all the men in Pine Valley and knew it *would* probably kill them. The front door to her dress shop—dress shop? She almost snorted aloud but then managed to control herself—crashed open, and a little boy dashed in and slammed the door closed. The boy looked her in the eye, looked left and right, saw the counter to her right, took two running steps and dove behind it.

From behind the counter, she heard a quavering voice whisper, “Don’t tell.”

Heavy boots thudded on the boardwalk that fronted her shop. Through her small windows she saw a man dash past and keep running. Her shop was the last one on this side of the street. The thudding stopped.

The man shouted, “Sam, you get back here!”

Nell recognized the voice. Brandon Nolte. A homesteader she barely knew. But the general shape of him in the glimpse she’d gotten through the windows matched the voice, though she’d never heard him shout before. She’d hardly ever heard him speak before.

But it was him.

The thudding started again, coming straight for her shop.

He thrust open the door. “Sam, are you in here?”

The whisper came again. “Don’t tell.”

She did *not* want to get in the middle of a fight between a man and his runaway son.

“Can I help you, Mr. Nolte?”

He was looking all over, and when she spoke, he almost stumbled. As if he were surprised there was a person in the room. She sat behind a worktable, putting iron rivets in chaps. Her friend Mariah had made the rivets for her.

“I’m looking for Sam.”

She’d heard he had a family, but she didn’t know much about who lived on the homestead with him. Obviously he had at least one child. “You’ve misplaced your son?”

“I’m not a boy!” The voice wasn’t quavery then so much as it was the high-pitched voice of a girl.

Brand wheeled around to glare at the counter. He gave Nell a narrow-eyed look with a pair of cool blue eyes.

“You come out of there. Right now.”

The little—Nell quickly shifted her thinking—little *girl* popped up from behind the counter. Short hair. Not shorn exactly, but a crop of unruly brown hair that looked boyish to Nell, sticking out from under a slouchy broad-brimmed hat. Blue eyes that gleamed with fury and unshed tears. The girl looked a whole lot like her dark-haired, blue-eyed pa. They even had nearly the same haircut. She wore a plaid flannel shirt and overalls. What was more, now that the girl was in view and glaring at her pa, she wasn't all that little. Possibly a young lady, fourteen or fifteen maybe. Hard to tell, what with the shapeless clothes.

"I'm not going into that general store dressed like this. You go on and drag the rest of my poor sisters in and humiliate them if you've a mind. But no one in town is gonna see me dressed like this. I won't be going to church neither, nor to school. You just go on while I start the hike home."

"I told you, Sam, you need to get over being shy."

Sam didn't look that shy to Nell. She looked embarrassed to death, and furious.

"Is the problem your clothes?" Nell asked.

Both whipped their heads around and glared at her like she was an unwanted intrusion.

Well, too bad. They should have picked another place for their argument than her shop. *They* were the intruders.

"Because making proper dresses for girls is what I do here." In theory anyway. Fact was, she mostly made chaps, as well as trousers and flannel shirts. "Do you need a dress for church and school? And what is your name?"

"It's Samantha. He always calls me Sam. It's dreadful."

"All right. Mr. Nolte, do you really want your daughter,

a young woman she seems like to me, to parade around town in britches? Does that seem proper to you?”

Brand, still staring daggers at Nell, said, “It’s all she’s got, and all I know how to make.”

“Can you afford the material for dresses for your daughters?”

Brand’s expression softened a bit. “Not really. We’ve been getting by with little or no cash money for a while now. We got to Pine Valley at a poor time of year last fall. I’ve got a small flock of chickens for eggs and a couple of cows that provide us milk. I didn’t grow so much as a single potato to get us through the winter. I can’t be buying dresses. What little I have . . .” His voice faltered.

Nell noticed a flush high on his cheeks, as if he were ashamed of being poor.

“What I have went to laying in supplies for the long, cold winter we just survived. What I got left over is for more supplies and seed. I don’t have cash for much else. None of the girls like wearing britches, and I let the winter provide an excuse to never attend church, nor to bring the girls into town for school. But that is over now.”

Nell quit watching a grown man blush and turned to the girl. A girl. A real live girl in need of a dress. Nell was tempted to grab her and run. Keep her forever.

“You have another daughter?”

“Three. Cassie and Mick.”

“Cassandra and Michaela,” Samantha said with scorn. “Their names are Cassandra and Michaela, and I’m Samantha. You don’t even know we’re girls, Pa.”

Brand studied his defiant young daughter. “I reckon

the others are young enough they don't feel so bad about how I dress them."

"Yes, they do."

His shoulders slumped. He looked purely demoralized. Then he swept one hand toward the door. "Walk on home. I'll pick you up along the trail when I've finished with my ordering."

The defiance drained out of Samantha, and she darted around the counter and threw herself into Brand's arms. "Pa, don't feel so bad. I just want to stay home. Maybe in a year we'll be able to buy some material and get dresses made up for us girls. But I *can't* go to church or school dressed like this. I can't. I just can't." Samantha wailed her last few words, let go of her pa, and ran for the door.

"Stop. Right. There." Nell had a voice that cracked like a whip. She didn't use it often, but her late husband had taught her a lot about how to go about surviving on the frontier, and one of the things she knew how to do, when it was called for, was to take command of a situation.

Samantha whirled to face her. Brand crossed his arms and glared again. He might not like it, but he wasn't talking.

"I am a woman who makes pretty dresses for a living. I will make three dresses."

Brand started shaking his head.

Nell plunged onward before he could say no. "*In exchange* for the three of them coming in to work for me after school each day. Mr. Nolte, you can simply wait to fetch them until two hours after the normal end of the school day. They will earn a dime a day apiece, and I will wait to pay them until they've earned the value of their

dresses. That will take about a month of their labor. After that, if they want to continue working for me, I'll pay cash money. Or they can earn a bonnet or a second dress, whichever one interests them."

No one really knew how much money she'd made making chaps. Honestly, it was so much that she was probably the richest person in town. But making chaps was a huge bore. She was so completely tired of them! She'd pay the girls for nothing more than coming in to talk to her. And she'd make them all the dresses they wanted for free because she had bolts of material on hand she'd brought west with her, thinking fabric would be hard to come by in a place like Wyoming.

She'd pretty much accepted that she was never going to turn the fabric into dresses. Honestly, she'd pay their father if she could get the girls to come into her shop after school and stay for a spell. She was almost giddy about the prospect. But remembering the father's embarrassment, she knew his pride wouldn't allow taking the dresses as a gift.

"Do you girls know how to sew?"

Samantha shook her head. Nell saw the hope in her eyes. Samantha didn't make a sound, as if afraid one wrong word might sway her father away from the offer.

"Then I'll teach you. It will be like training my employees." Almost dizzy with what felt like a diabolical plot, Nell wondered if she could teach the girls to make chaps. She'd leave out the cost of the leather and give the girls the rest of what they'd earn. She tried not to giggle. "I'll teach you to make chaps, too. If you show skill at it, I may have to raise your salary. For now, though, we'll start with a dime."

She really had no idea what proper wages were. Maybe a dime was miserly. Maybe it was a fortune. “I’ll make the dresses for you before next Sunday. That way you can go to church dressed properly.” She looked at Brand and arched one brow. “Does that sound all right to you?”

Brand’s jaw clenched. He turned to look at his daughter and must have seen the hope shining in her pretty blue eyes.

He nodded silently.

Samantha shrieked and flung herself into her father’s arms for the second time. But this time it was with unbridled joy.

“Mr. Nolte”—Nell tried to sound stern so he’d take her seriously, when she wanted to shriek and hug him just like his daughter had—“would you go to your other daughters, who are no doubt waiting in your wagon, and send them into my shop? I’ll take their measurements, and they’ll be ready to ride home with you when you’ve finished at the general store. It’s Monday, so if you can get back to town on Saturday, I’ll have the dresses done, and you can bring the girls here so we can try them on.”

She could just send the dresses with him, but she wanted to make the girls feel pretty in the new dresses. She couldn’t wait to see each of the girls wearing them.

“Samantha, you stay here with me while your pa gets Cassandra and Michaela.” She wasn’t asking permission. She was, in fact, throwing Pa out and keeping the girl. There was no sense running off with her. Nell had nowhere to hide.

But she could come close.

Brand gave Nell a frustrated look, then looked down at

Samantha, jerked his head in a nod, and stomped out of the shop. He slammed the door behind him. That might be a manly pride thing, too. Nell had seen a prideful man kicking up a fuss over things she couldn't understand many times. Her late husband had more than his share of stubborn pride.

Once he was out of sight, Nell looked at Samantha, who ran into her arms just like she had her pa's and squealed. Nell couldn't help but join in the ruckus.